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Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Cultural Industries

Angela McRobbie

Polity, 2016. Paperback

Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Cultural Industries begins with the 'euphoric' moment of new creative economy in Britain under the prime minister Tony Blair's leadership (1997-2007). Mostly based on research in Britain, McRobbie makes a case for how young urban middle classes are co-opted by the economic austerity that follows. To a large extent, this book is a reflection and an extension on the seminal work that the author has done on the UK cultural and creative workforce with additional case studies undertaken in Berlin and Italy. The book ends in an optimistic outlook when it concludes with a foray into these European perspectives, which took on particular significance because countries such as Italy faced the 2008 global economic crisis and adopted their cultural policy in response to it. One of the key contributions that *Be Creative* makes is around the concept of *dispositif*—'a self-monitoring, self-regulating mechanism' (p.38), through which McRobbie forcefully argues a segment of the young population is managed by 'turning culture into an instrument of both competition and labour discipline' (p.38).

The Introduction sums up key terms that have occupied scholars of cultural and creative labour over the past couple of decades—individualism, entrepreneurship, flexibility and precarity. McRobbie locates them through the tertiary education in arts and humanities, which cater for young students drawn from global wealthy classes. She describes the transnational flow of know-how, while local job markets are still based on rich social networks. Reflective of the author's association with the British Cultural Studies tradition, she highlights the shift from an academic interest in subculture and working classes to an analysis of post-industrialisation and the age of 'entrepreneurial university' (p.9).

McRobbie refers back to her work on cultural economy in the UK, and London in particular, and the way that the government has co-opted the cultural and creative industries in the process of neoliberalisation—a political move which has been prominent since New Labour of the 1990s. Chapter 1 reiterates her argument about network sociality among young creatives which can be traced to dance and club culture (McRobbie 2002, 516-531). By way of update, McRobbie laments the demise of the independent cultural sector, which has been increasingly driven by the market.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Unpacking the Politics of Creative Labour' and it discusses groups of creative workers who have bought 'the romance of being creative' (pp.33-42): hipsters, bohemians, the middle class. In the next two chapters, the author continues to delineate her thesis of *dispositif* through examining the class and gender dimensions of the political use of precarious cultural and creative labour. In particular, middle class young creatives are pushed towards labour precarisation. Much of the discussion contained in this book refers to the British context, especially during the period 1997-2012, straddling post-Thatcher and post-Blair Britain. Creative workers are co-opted in neoliberal governmentality to seemingly tackle the under-employment and unemployment of graduates. Thus, they become 'creative entrepreneurs', rather than precarious workers who live with the paradox of a dream job and self-exploitation. Further delineating the contemporary state of creative

labour, McRobbie focuses on the gender and class dimensions, and describes how young women and middle class graduates perform affective, immaterial labour.

Chapter 5 is based on empirical research that revises McRobbie's published work on the fashion design industry. Entitled 'Fashion Matters Berlin: City-Spaces, Women's Working Lives, New Social Enterprise?', the chapter moves away from the UK focus. In particular, it contrasts the UK-centric of the previous discussion with a case study of Berlin's small-scale fashion scene. Though the Berlin and German national political agenda has been 'increasingly driven by a neoliberal agenda, [the ideas of new creative economy] remain strongly inflected by social democratic thinking' (p.115) where the creative economy's developmental potential for urban employment is recognised and encouraged by the government.

The Berlin model includes support for ethnic and women entrepreneurs through social projects. One developing urban area is the work class and Turkish-German district of NeuKöln, which has also seen the blossoming of other entertainment businesses. McRobbie asserts that unlike London, there is a shared political consciousness among different classes including resistance to aggressive property development. The district also exemplifies post-Fordist fashion production where micro-enterprises revives the art and craft in fashion designs rather than the encouragement of mass fast fashion. The cultural policy predicates on social start-ups and job creation, and is supported by the Berlin Senate.

It is particularly timely that McRobbie turns to European cases after examining the creative work conditions as the UK is about to face the consequences of Brexit. Chapter 6, aptly entitled 'A good job done well', considers the increasingly blurred class distinction and its relationship with labour. The author evokes Richard Sennett and his writing on the 'new work regime' who argues for the dignity of labour (pp.146-150), which explains how in the affluent West, 'flexible work' and unemployment of the qualified, and unpaid labour and low-skilled jobs are increasingly mixing. Precarious work conditions are experienced by the marginalised, migrants and urban middle class alike. The book ends with a more positive note in considering collective, community responses to the creative *dispositif*. The new craft movement—young women re-discover dress-making and crafts in the re-traditionalisation of creative work (pp.164-166)—may be 'unashamedly re-claimed' by feminism (p.166). The recent Women's Marches and the pink knitted pussyhat are a visual reminder of this.

Be Creative consolidates some of McRobbie's earlier work while provoking new debates about the effects of the economic crisis and the precarisation of creative labour on the young, urban generation in the neoliberal political landscape of the West. The book may inspire work that reaches beyond Europe and the UK, and that delves deeper into the effects of the intersections between gender, ethnicities and class.

Bibliography

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